

## **Barr sharpening ax on legal aid to poor**

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Washington --- The organization that pays for legal representation for the poor could be in trouble. Bob Barr, the conservative Republican congressman from Georgia, is asking questions about the Legal Services Corp.

Barr thinks the private, Washington-based non-profit organization, which pays local groups to represent the poor, is not doing business the way it should. He has asked the General Accounting Office to conduct a probe.

"We want to know why there's no peer accounting system, why there's no real method of competition for grants, and why meetings are held in secret," Barr said.

The congressman heads the House Judiciary subcommittee on commercial and administrative law, which oversees the Legal Services Corporation. Legal Services is funded by Congress through an annual appropriation: \$329.3 million for fiscal 2002. In Georgia, the organization channels funds to the Georgia Legal Services Program and the Atlanta Legal Aid Society.

Since 1994, when Republicans took over as the majority party in the Congress, GOP members have charged that the LSC takes part in political activities. Edwin Meese, attorney general under President Reagan, is among critics who have pointed out that Congress demanded in 1996 that the organization not do so.

LSC President John Erlenborn recently testified to Congress that the organization had instituted an oversight system run by 12 lawyers and other employees to ensure that its programs do not violate the rule.

"LSC has made every effort to ensure that the congressional restrictions placed on grantees are strictly observed," Erlenborn said.

"We pledge to continue working with this committee to improve the civil justice delivery system in America," he said, "and to ensure federal dollars allocated for legal services are being spent in the most efficient and cost-effective manner possible."

Erlenborn said that Congress had stipulated that LSC-funded programs are forbidden from filing or litigating class-action lawsuits, engaging in lobbying, litigating on behalf of prisoners, or representing most undocumented immigrants.

Critics say that the LSC-funded organizations tend to defend people involved in leftist causes.

"Unfortunately, the Legal Services Corp. that's in existence now is dedicated to political activism and leftist causes, and, sometimes, the representation of the poor," said Todd Gaziano, senior fellow in legal studies at the Washington-based Heritage Foundation.

Gaziano is working with Meese in opposing the LSC.

"The representation of the poor is kind of low down on their list of priorities," Gaziano said.

"The current Clinton-appointed board has thumbed its nose at congressional attempts to focus the Legal Services Corp. on its mission of helping indigent litigants in certain types of proceedings."

A House Democratic staffer close to the case said that GAO studies in the past have proved that LSC is complying fully with the congressional stipulations.

The Legal Services Corp. came about in 1974 under President Richard Nixon. It is run by an 11-member board appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. No more than six members of the bipartisan board can be from any one political party.

President Bush is expected to name new board members soon, and Barr said he would like to have an effect on those appointments. He said this week that he had sent a letter to the White House spelling out his questions about the organization.

"I'm not a fan of spending taxpayer dollars on the Legal Services Corp.," Barr said. "It could run on private contributions and, if a state believes it ought to be involved, then through state funds."

But Barr also said: "I don't think its realistic that we're going to be able to zero it out. Therefore, we should at least make it operate within the bounds of the law."